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Deborah Cohen, Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-0199977802, $36.95. 372pp

This innovative, provocative and thoroughly enjoyable book will provide food for thought for anyone with an interest in family history or cultures of secrecy. Written for a wide readership, it is a work of serious scholarship, and its scope and ambition – roaming from the late eighteenth century to the present day – put many of us to shame. But Cohen makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of what families tried to hide in the past. She proceeds, instead, through a well-chosen series of case studies involving different types of concealment and revelation - from attempts to obscure the background of illegitimate or adopted children, to the exposure of marital infidelities and 'deviant' sexualities – and predominantly featuring the 'respectable' middle-classes who were most invested in the preservation of reputation. In the face of this diverse material the author ensures analytical coherence by showing how each case study illuminates the changing relationship between privacy and secrecy. Whereas for the Victorians 'secrecy was privacy's indispensable handmaiden' (p. 4), a necessary strategy for protecting a family's good name, secrecy gradually came to be seen as unhealthy and repressive, and confession, in the right circumstances, was encouraged and praised. Yet this is no celebratory story of gradual enlightenment: the author adeptly demonstrates how the dynamics of privacy and secrecy were constantly shifting, so that, for example, mental deficiency became far more a source of family shame and discomfort in the interwar period than it had been in earlier decades. Cohen challenges many of our simplistic assumptions about the trajectories and expectations of privacy.

The book is structured in three parts. The first features two chapters on nineteenth-century secret-keeping, so important in a society determined to scrutinise and judge personal behaviour. Cohen shows how the expanding empire was the source of many moral dilemmas, brought into focus when adventurers and administrators took home, and concealed the background of, the mixed-race children

that resulted from liaisons with native women. Although some of these children managed to negotiate their entrance into 'respectable' society – often with the assistance of sympathetic relatives – many others could not escape the circumstances of the birth, especially as beliefs in racial difference hardened over the Victorian period. The author also provides some fascinating material on the establishment and operation of the Divorce Court in 1857. Numerous scholars have written about Victorian divorce and have mined the sensational press coverage of collapsing marriages, but Cohen's distinctive focus is on the office of the Queen's Proctor, created in 1860 to investigate cases of suspected collusion between petitioners. Divorce was based on a system of marital offences, and was awarded only to 'innocent' parties; if it was suggested that a spouse was concealing his or her own infidelities to secure a separation, the Queen's Proctor stepped in to seek out skeletons in the closet, and indeed encouraged friends and neighbours to submit evidence. The Victorian desire to prevent the morally culpable from obtaining a divorce generated a remarkable apparatus of official snooping into private lives, and provoked those determined to escape unhappy marriages into desperate acts of secret keeping.

Post-Victorians would frequently portray the moralism and secrecy of their predecessors as hypocritical and emotionally damaging, and congratulate themselves on their openness. Yet Cohen demonstrates that the transition from large Victorian households, which offered sufficient space to incorporate difference, to smaller servant-less families after the First World War, brought new pressures and expectations. The second section of the book, which follows early twentieth-century families responding to the challenges posed by mental disability, adoption, or the 'eccentricity' of the 'bachelor uncle', shows that the increasingly prescribed notions of 'normality' characteristic of modern, mediated societies could generate new forms of shame and anxiety, and make 'deviations' harder to accept. In a heart-breaking chapter on the institutionalisation of the 'feeble-minded', drawing heavily on the records of the famous Normansfield Training Institution, founded in 1868 by John and Mary Langdon Down, Cohen argues that the Victorian optimism about improving the lives of the mentally disabled was

gradually lost as heredity increasingly came to define the understanding of ability and character. Seeking to 'conceal the disgrace of a tainted blood line' (p.123), families hid away their mentally disabled children; one girl discussed by Cohen did not receive a single visitor after she reached the age of eighteen. Similarly, the discussion and definition of different sexualities left less room to incorporate single men into family life without difficult questions. In the field of adoption, moreover, new forms of privacy were established. In 1949, Parliament removed the provision that birth mothers consented to adoption with full knowledge of where her child was going; now an 'iron curtain' would be established between natural and adoptive families. Debates about what information needed to be shared in adoption cases were particularly acute, and would continue to rumble on, because ideas changed about how best to reconcile the rights and interests of the different parties involved.

The book's final part explores the emergence of modern confessional culture, from the columns of the *Daily Mirror* in the 1930s, via consultations with marriage guidance counsellors and psychologists, to the current vogue for genealogical revelation. As Cohen observes, though, if sharing problems, and disclosing secrets, was increasingly encouraged, this did not mean necessarily that the desire for privacy diminished; privacy was merely redefined along more individualistic lines. By the 1960s, indeed, the family unit was often seen as an agent of repression rather than the foundation of society. As the leading anthropologist Edward Leach provocatively remarked in 1967, 'the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents' (p. 228). Sharing, moreover, often meant getting something off one's chest rather than 'talking it through': Cohen notes the frustration of marriage guidance counsellors at the frequency with which clients would attend one consultation to unburden themselves and never attend again. Opening up one's soul was often the response to a personal psychological need or a desire to fashion a particular self-identity, rather than to let in other people.

This is a fascinating book, full of rich human stories and insightful analysis, drawing on many previously unused sources, and written in a lucid and refreshingly accessible fashion. The reliance on case studies inevitably means that some generalisations are not fully explored or supported, and some nuances are not teased out. It would have been interesting to have further reflection on the implications of seeing families as agents of social change, but this is a book with an eye for the general reader, and such discussions are understandably restricted in favour of the personal narratives. Overall, though, one is struck by how confident and sure-footed the author is when traversing this terrain. This is a book to seek out and cherish.

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